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ABSTRACT

Black colleges have an extraordinary opportunity to develop a situation in which black people develop their own critical apparatus and come to use their own yardsticks rather than the traditional white yardsticks. The position of the white teacher in the black college is, then, a difficult tricky situation. The white teacher must learn to turn the ordinary run of instruction around so that more and more of the presentation comes from the students. He must accept the simple truth that in dealing with the black material, his students have more to teach him than he has to teach them. (MJM)

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Black Studies, White Teachers, and Black Colleges

by John U. Monro

There are two general things I would like to talk about: first the notion of relevance and timeliness in curriculum; and second, a general consideration of the black college, where it is and where it ought to be.

I'm going to plunge into the problem of relevance and timeliness by asking a question which I do not think we ask often enough, and which is always in the middle of any faculty debate. What is a college supposed to do anyway? What is the college's obligation to its students, its prime obligation? The college has custody of 500, 1000, or 5000 students and that is why it is there. Not to allow the faculty to conduct its research, not to give the president a fancy office, not to give alumni thrills on Saturday afternoons. The whole point of a college is what you do for your students. And, with a qualification or two, the truth of the matter is that the college is free to try almost anything it wants to.

The sacred area of credit can stir up a lot of miserable debate.

The sacred area of credit and what you are going to give credit for can stir up a lot of miserable debate. Most college professors who conduct this kind of debate are not such thoughtful educators after all. They are specialists in geology or chemistry and really are no more expert on general problems of education than most well-informed laymen. They are "experts" on education because they can, like anybody else, always relate back to the school they went to like Boston Latin, or some experience they had. The truth is that most senior faculty members have not given much thought to what the college is trying to do until they come to a question like: are we going to give credit for this English course? If I speak with feeling on this point it is because I have been in the middle of so many of these debates. You can get more silly talk about educational policy in a college faculty of arts and sciences than you can imagine. The fact remains that the college can always do what it wants to do; the college can really define itself.

Now, how do we do that? One thing we often lose track of it that we cannot and do not do the same thing for all students. Some people try to use Harvard as a standard of some kind. I promise you, as one who used to help decide with the faculty committee on the marginal degrees at Harvard Commencement, the anchor man in the Harvard class has a very different education from the man who graduates summa cum laude in organic chemistry. In fact, he has been in a completely different institution, with completely different attitudes about it. It is not the same education at all. The anchor man is a man who rowed on the crew, who joined a club, whose whole life has been socialized. He majors in social relations so he can work it up at the last minute; most of it he knows already by reading the *New York Times*. He hardly ever goes to class. He wouldn't be found dead in the library. And there are plenty of such students at any college you can name. On the other hand, you have people for whom the curriculum is fiercely functional. Their whole being is going to depend on how they do in organic chemistry. They get in there and dig and learn an awful lot, one way or another.

So, there are such differences of temperament, ability, goals, maturity, personal energy, family background, that when the college postulates on standards, or says, "We've got certain standards here that have to be maintained," the faculty is looking at people who graduated with honors. They are not looking at all the people who are graduating marginally.

There are, however, certain rough standards that we all have in mind, and it will pay us to look at them. First, I think most of us have in mind a general level of literacy: the ability to read and write complex materials. We get an annual affirmation of this from the fact that businesses come in to us to hire people who are going into executive training. They want our graduates because our graduates can read office memoranda, company manuals, instruction books, and correspondence of a fairly complicated nature. The same for the Armed Services looking for officers. These operations are huge bureaucracies and they run on paper work. Somebody has to be able to read and write on a certain level. In our society teaching to read and write amounts to vocational training. I do not think I am misstating the fact.

Another part of the curriculum we have been working at for forty or fifty years at the colleges is a broadening out of courses, or what we now think of as a general education. We want our students to have a certain beginning familiarity with history, an idea of where we stand in time, where our civilization

HE 004 920

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stands in relationship to other civilizations. And we want a certain familiarity with science. Science and math are of increasing importance because ours is a scientific and technical age. If a man does not understand some minimum things about science and technology, he really is not equipped as a citizen. A hundred and fifty years ago the same kind of emphasis was placed on religion as the absolutely essential qualification of an educated citizen. The tendency now is to play religion down and emphasize science.

We don't do at all well with the creative side of human behavior.

We in the colleges don't do at all well with the creative side of human behavior. About the only field we do much with is literature, and we don't do well with that because we are in the hands of the critical scholars who don't create anything, but criticize other people's work. Most colleges have a terrible time getting in anything effective in the way of art or music or creative or poetry. Simply put, these creative things have no special validity for most professors of English, and they have the senatorial positions.

There is a lot of disagreement on the details of general education that I have been sketching out here. But most of us, I think, would agree that part of the college effort now is to provide some of that sort of thing. And, of course, you get a great variety from college to college. Indeed, you get great variety from student to student even within a given college, because most colleges allow for individual choices here.

Another thing that goes on in colleges is the development of some kind of major. Most of us have agreed on that. Now, again I want to suggest that there is a wide spectrum of difference. For instance, most colleges have a business major; the business major is designed to get people ready to go into office work and there is a good deal of emphasis on machines, on typing, on accounting and so on. It is often narrowly vocational, but it is a major. It is a useful major for many people. Take education. Lots of our graduates go into teaching, and at Miles this major is pretty well stipulated by the State of Alabama. There are certain requirements for certification. These are spelled out and we meet them and we have relatively few options as to what the kids are going to do besides what the State stipulates.

On the other hand, we all have students in social studies, or doing a history major, or doing a sociology major, who have the broadest kind of program. It may be vocational or it may not. And it may be very broad; it may be just an extension of general education or it may not.

What I am trying to point out here is that with respect to the major, as with the whole college program, a tremendous variety of educational purposes are being served, and it makes no sense for any college to try to say with any precision "This is what we are trying to do."

The ordinary faculty member is conservative and will exclude what people are trying to develop in the way of curriculum reform.

The average college goes along, doing what it does, and then trying to realize some kind of "educational philosophy." The ordinary faculty member is conservative and will usually try to rationalize things in such a way as to exclude what people are trying to develop in the way of curriculum reform. They will say that if you don't teach Keats and Wordsworth in the freshman year the sky is going to fall. Now, I want to remind you that we have had a very powerful, important voice speak up to just this effect within the last month or two! Bayard Rustin. I mention him specifically because it is appropriate to our point to realize that there are powerful voices within our faculties and outside our faculties with the same view. He said, in effect, "The movement toward Black Studies is all wrong. You know, when you get through college, people don't ask whether you know Black Studies. They ask whether you can do mathematics or whether you can write a sentence." There are a great many senior citizens in the black community who feel this way and curriculum developers are going to feel the weight of such conservatism if they have not already. And of course, millions of people in the white community feel this way because, in their isolation and ignorance, they do not have any sense of the richness or the importance of Black Studies. I am sure Bayard Rustin does. What he loses track of, since he is not a teacher, is that you can teach a student how to write a sentence better if he is working on material that is of direct consequence to him.

Let John Keats wait! The first thing they read is the Autobiography of Malcolm X.

I will put it on the line – let John Keats wait! Take my freshmen. The first thing they read in college, crack out of the box, is the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. They have never read it. They haven't been allowed to read it in the Birmingham schools, and they want to find out about Malcolm. I am sure most of you know this book. What a wonderful book in American literature, one of *the* great books in American literature. But we are not allowed to know this for sure until some recognized professor

of English says so, or until the book gets into the library canon. You think I'm kidding? I can recall marvelous arguments about Frederick Douglass with some of our graduate student–teachers who questioned the teaching of such books, because they were not very "respectable" academically. At some point you have to ask them what happened to *Moby Dick*. *Moby Dick* was written in 1851 but it was not "discovered" as a "respectable" book until 1920 when Carl Van Doren discovered it and said, "This is a good book." And then all the academic people nodded and said, "Why, for sure, it is a good book." And then we started getting all those Ph.D. theses about Melville. But for the first 70 years *Moby Dick* was just too long, too complicated, too intricate, too difficult, just another whaling story with a lot of junk in it that no one could understand.

We are going through the same difficulty with Frederick Douglass autobiography. The narrative of his life as a slave is one of the great books of American literature. Are we going to sit around and wait for a Carl Van Doren of 1980 to tell us so? As human beings, we should know its greatness from reading the book, reading the compassion of this man, his power to observe, his power to set things down so you can feel them.

What matters in working with our students is not that we fill them up (and bore them stiff) with "classics", but that we be free to work with material of undoubted human worth and literary quality, even if such material has not gained a recognized position in the standard literary museum. Using such material we can hope to interest our students in reading, in ideas, in new vocabulary, even in grammar. You can never get through to them with material, no matter how "respectable" that bores them stiff.

What I am trying to say is that it is a practical matter what a college does. We are trying to take people up to a certain level of literacy that is not well defined. The variation in level of literacy is enormous from one college to another, and indeed within a given college.

Let's come in a bit tighter on the question of relevancy, and think of the senior professor who wants to teach courses in medieval Celtic, or ancient Afghanistan archaeology. You can look in any university catalogue and take your pick of such specialties. They seem silly to ordinary folks, but they are meaningful, and they are dutifully listed in the catalog if somebody wants to teach them. That is our system.

The thing I do not understand is how people can read through all that stuff in university catalogues and then find fault with Black Studies. I am not just beating a dead horse here: this is a live issue on many campuses. Think of the amount of time we spend teaching the *Iliad*. I will not embarrass you good people by asking how many have read the *Iliad* through. I have not, and I cannot. I have tried often, as a genuflection in the direction of Western civilization. Every five years I break out the *Iliad* as some new translation appears, and everybody says this is finally the great translation of the great classic. What it turns out to be every time is a story about a pirate war in the Dardanelles two or three thousand years ago, with some kind of memorial list of all the people who got killed in this war, and the way they got killed. They got their heads cut off, or got run over by a chariot. There's page after page of this death list. What they are mainly trying to do in this book is memorialize a lot of characters that nobody ever heard anything about, never cared about. But anyway it is, no questions asked, our students have got to understand the *Iliad*, the great epic!

The whole American population needs "Black Studies."

For over three hundred years our people in the U.S.A. have been living through the greatest tragic struggle anybody has ever known: the terrible struggle to try to get rid of slavery, and then, having gotten rid of that awful experience, to work our way through a racial confrontation. There is no greater epic in the world than this. And if our society does not figure out how to shed our old atavistic suspicions, hatreds and divisions, our corner of the world is going to go up in smoke. How can anybody in his right mind "put down" Black Studies? The whole American population needs "Black Studies." The only people for whom Black Studies are more important than the black race is the white race. This is so obvious a thing that one should not have to say it, but you have to say it.

"Ghetto economics" is a way of studying what happens to poor families in the ghettos, how they get cheated. It is also a marvelous way into sociology, the capitalistic system, the profit system, the system of price controls, and incidently, on the mathematical side, statistics.

At Miles College one of our ablest Social Studies teachers, Lorenzo Brown, came up with a workable idea of how to teach students about writing critical essays. In teaching our students he tried to piece together what differentiated the kind of critical mind you run into in college and graduate school from the usual un-critical mind of the highschooler. He decided that well-trained college and graduate students have been exposed to a formula for writing papers that calls always for a balancing of opposing positions.

The critical essay seemed to Mr. Brown a most important formula. One of the things you do in a critical essay right off, after you have introduced

what it is you are going to talk about, is to develop a very careful statement of the position under examination. A brief synopsis of the position is given, so careful that the author himself will say, "Yes, that's what I mean." Then in the third paragraph you say, "Now, given this position, we want to examine Mr. X's attitude and ideas," and you start to tear him apart. Most of our kids do not know this pattern. Lorenzo Brown is right. After you have read your first one hundred copies of the "New Republic" or the "New York Review of Books" you begin to get the picture. Slowly but surely you begin to recognize the model.

"Write a critical essay about this thing you violently disagree with."

Lorenzo Brown said at a staff meeting that we were doing such a poor job of teaching freshman English and doing it so slowly, that he felt obliged to teach his own class how to write a critical essay, before he could teach them anything else. So, he would spend the first month of college teaching this. We thought we were doing well if we did it in eight months. He had his students buy a little book of Eric Lincoln's, *Is Anybody Listening to Black America*. It is a couple hundred pages of all kinds of expressions of attitudes from the black community, from Uncle Tom positions, clear over to the most passionate Black Panther positions and everything in between, with editorials, letters, articles, speeches, sermons from different religious points of view. What Mr. Brown wanted the students to do was very simple. He said, "Read around in here and find something you disagree with." And that was easy. One place or another a student is going to have a violent reaction against something he finds in this book. Having got them in that far, Lorenzo Brown said, "OK, now what I want you to do is write a critical essay about this thing you violently disagree with." The students had a terrible time with the assignment. So he then introduced his little formula. The formula was very simple. Lorenzo Brown supplied a few introductory words for each paragraph in the "formula" essay:

1. In this essay we will consider the views of Mr. X Y., as expressed in his article.
2. Mr. Y. has three main points in his position. First, he says that. . . . . Second, he says that. . . . . Finally, it is his view that. . . . .
3. In his conclusion he says, "_____
_____
4. There is much to be said for part of Mr. Y's position. I find myself in agreeement with him when he says. . . . . .
5. However, in two important ways, I wish to take issue with Mr. Y.
6. First, I disagree with him when he says_____ _____. My *reasons* for disagreeing are _____
7. Second, and most important, I disagree with him when he says_____ My reasons for disagreeing on this point are _____
8. All in all, I conclude. . . . . .

Using this simple little formula in three or four weeks Mr. Brown had his students writing critical essays. The sudents could not always write sentences, could not always make subject and verb agree, and they were misspelling everything in sight. But the papers were in a recognizable form. Suddenly the teacher is in a position where he can supply some meaningful critique. The kids understood the pattern, and they are on their way. Spelling can wait.

I am sure you all know the remarkable new anthology, *Black Voices*, a Signet anthology, $1.50. It is beginning to flesh out our work, especially in freshman English. With such an anthology you can go in and find anything you want. For instance, last year I had a beautiful month with my English class on metaphor, simply by observing that each one of the major Black authors, DuBois, Wright, Hughes, Baldwin, Ellison, in his struggle with the problem of the effect of segregation on his life,had come up with a brilliant, almost overwhelming metaphor on the subject. All we had to do was begin to define metaphor a little bit and then turn the students loose in certain areas of the book and they were off on their own. They got a rich sense of metaphor here, related to their own lives, that will be critically important for understanding all the rest of literature. Once they have this, they can turn around and dig metaphor in Shakespeare or they can dig metaphor in Keats.

I want to say a few things quickly about the Black College. For, as you know, over half of the black young men and women in the country who go to college come to the Black colleges, and that is going to continue. We have an interesting new study from the Southern Education Reporting Service, by a good reporter, John Edgerton. Mr. Edgerton studied Black student enrollment in the big public land grant universities. He looked at the hundred biggest public universities in the country, fifteen years after the Brown Decision. And fifteen years after the Brown Decision, 2% - 3% of the undergraduates in these big publicly supported universities are Black students. It is a dismal record; and it is not going to get better in a hurry. So nobody should have any doubt about the consequence of what the Black colleges are doing. But on that score, there is something going on that is going to make our work, the threshold work, more important. The big univer-

sities are going to do their best to drain off the best students. All of our Black colleges are going to feel this. The big universities are going to drain of the best students, and the whole trend is going to encourage an awful lot of kids to come to college who are less well prepared than the kids we have been having, — just as bright, but less well prepared. So our threshold work, as I see it, is going to be more important. More kids will want to go to college and will crowd in on us, while the ablest students will be drained off with very attractive scholarship offers. We should cheer these students on for what they are going to do to those universities. They are going to make it where ever they go, whether they go to Miles, the University of Alabama, or wherever. But, what they are going to do to the University of Alabama and the people there is of very great consequence for our country.

Ours is a brutal country, respectful of power, not of prayers, or pleas.

Now I want to move on to another aspect of the Black colleges, to the idea of Black institutional strength. I want to get on to the ground of black power. I am very much encouraged by the Black Power operation, and what it implies, and the way it is moving. I have been living in this country for fifty-six years, long enough to know that ours is a brutal country respectful of power and not much else. It is not respectful of prayers, or pleas or niceness, or courtesy. It is respectful of power.

The people of my generation can recall very well the uproar and outrage amongst our propertied classes in the 1930's when working men began to organize effectively into industrial unions and confront General Motors, and Ford, and the steel and coal industry. The sit-ins at General Motors in the 1930's produced the same cries of outrage as Martin King's marches in the 1960's. But in each case, the establishment found its interests threatened, and had to pay attention.

As soon as the labor unions persuaded Ford Motor Company and General Motors, and U.S. Steel and Republic Steel, that unless they worked out some accommodations with the unions there was not going to be any business, we started to get somewhere. The black community is in the same position now. I do not like violence; it scares me. I have seen too much of it. But you really did not get the Urban Coalition in this country of concerned, big shot, blue chip business men until Newark happened, and until Detroit happened. And remember all that was two years after Watts happened. The establishment did not read Watts correctly at all until Newark and Detroit came along. Newark and Detroit had the additional effect of threatening the downtown business area which American Tel. and Tel. and General Motors and Ford depend upon a run their business. But today if you go, say, to a United Negro College Fund Meeting in Detroit, it is a very remarkable meeting because all the big corporation guys are there. They come, they care, they are concerned; and they had better be. The thing they are concerned about is profits. That is what a corporation has to be concerned about. The important thing for the country is that the big corporations are at long last concerned about the oppression of Black people in the U.S.A., and the dangerous degree of frustration that oppression has built up.

I remember, seven or eight years ago, when I was Dean at Harvard, a day when one of my assistants, the Dean of Freshmen, came in. The sky was falling, and he had to tell me about it and what was making it fall: seven or eight Negro students were sitting together at lunch at the Union. He said, "Now that's not what it's all about. They're starting to separate themselves, and that's segregation. What we're trying to work out is integration." I said, "OK, let's talk to some of the Black students and see what goes on." One of the students told me, "Look Dean, I like this place, but let me tell you, every time I get out of bed in the morning and go to class, it's like going over the top. Do you know what that means?" I said, "Yes, I think I do. Tell me more." And the student said. "Well, any day around here I never know what is going to happen to me. And every now and then I like to get with the folks, take my shoes off and be myself. You were kind enough to give me a white roommate. You didn't ask me whether I wanted a white roommate – but you gave me a white roommate. Every night I come in he wants to know how I feel as a black man in a white college. I'm sick of it." And finally this student said, "I understand how you're feeling, and what you're trying to do. But what I'm trying to do is different from what you're trying to do and it pays for you to understand."

Afro lunch table sure; Afro-Society, sure.

Afro lunch table, sure; Afro-Society, sure; Black Cultural Center, sure. White people worry about the Afro-Society, but they don't see all those white men on the Harvard governing boards, or the Yale governing boards, or the great corporate governing boards. We are going through a perilous time in the country, and much of the peril comes because of the lack of institutiohal strength in the Black community.

This is a country that depends on institutional strength. It is our national genius to organize companies, fraternities, corporations, churches, clubs, schools, neighborhood groups, women's poli-

tical organizations. Our whole country is interlocked with these institutions. Anybody who is anybody is in a dozen or more of these organizations, and they keep meeting one another and swapping the dope. The only people who do not have any part of this are the Black people. And this is very dangerous because it certainly does lead most young Black people to the right conclusion—that they don't have anything to say about what is going on in this country. They are right because the country is run by this network of institutions. And the Black people are outside.

The Black population could profit enormously from having a multiplication of Black colleges.

This is especially noticable in our national political life. Take the case of Miles College a then unaccredited, commuter college, with a thousand students. (Miles received accreditation in the fall of 1969.) Twice in two years Miles College has helped pull the City of Birmingham back from the brink of disorder: One year ago when Martin Luther King was killed, and again this Spring when we had a grievous case of police brutality. Now the only serious representation that the Black community in Birmingham had on these occasions was through Miles College working with the churches to develop an *ad hoc* remonstrance to City Hall. Otherwise, there was no proper representation of Black feeling in City Hall. We have to build Black institutional strength. I am at a point where I would say that any big city worth the name should move in right now and help establish Black colleges in the Black community. I am just so impressed with what the Black college can do for the community and for its own students; but more than that, what the Black college can do to educate the white community. I am not at all discouraged about the Black college. On the contrary, I think the Black population could profit enormously from having a multiplication of Black colleges, very strong Black colleges.

There is a chance for white teachers who want to make a contribution in a subordinate role to do so.

And finally, a word on the role of white teachers in the Black colleges. One thing, I think there should be no misunderstanding about who is running the Black college. We are very fortunate at our place. The President is a very strong, intelligent Black man, the Dean the same. The Registrar and the Dean of Students are Black, and the heads of the three divisions and close to seventy per cent of the faculty. We are in a situation where the Black leadership is visibly running the place, and nobody is in any doubt about it. Under these circumstances, I think there is a chance for white teachers who want to make some kind of contribution in a subordinate role, to do so.

Our President, Dr. Lucius Pitts is the man who integrated Miles College. Before he came there in 1961, there were no white teachers. For a couple of years he had just one white teacher. The President had one bad year – in 1966-67, when a group of ten or so young white liberals tried to take the college over. A serious question was raised then – whether there should be any more white teachers at Miles college. When the trouble simmered down, President Pitts said he still believed in integrating the college, for the standard virtues of racial mixture and confrontation. He still believed in that principle, and felt the fact that he had a bad year was due to some poor decisions about individuals and not that the principle was a bad principle. So, we would carry on. But it was that close in our place; and I think it will get that close in a lot of places.

I know it is a fact and I have to accept it, that when I teach a class in freshman English and work through Malcolm X or Frederick Douglass, it is a very different experience for those students than it would be if Lorenzo Brown was doing it. A very good case could be made for getting me out of there.

On the other hand, I believe it matters that the white teachers at Miles are the first white teachers most of our student have ever met. The Birmingham schools are still mostly segregated.

In working through this problem a lot depends on how the teacher behaves. You can learn how to set up your teaching in such a way that you are always bringing out the strengths of your students and their information. And you should not be telling them, you should be listening. They can teach you about Malcolm X and Frederick Douglass, and DuBois, and as plenty of professional literature will attest, the best way to learn is to teach. This applies not only to the teacher, but to the students. When the student gets a feeling that he is teaching you, something useful happens in that classroom.

I am persuaded that one of our principal tasks in the Black college and one of our principal opportunities, is to break a pattern which had dominated race relations in this country and made it so sick. This is the pattern of "white superiority," of Black people trying to be white, of Black people getting their signals about identity from the white community. A major instance of this is the critical apparatus of the country failing to recognize the validity of the Black writers, Black artists, Black drama, and Black music. I have noted elsewhere the tendency of our white teachers to say, "I don't know why you make us teach the Frederick Douglass narrative. It is just not that great a book." This attitude is a reflection of a profound sickness in our intellectual society, and in our universities and

colleges.

It is no question that we in the Black Colleges have an extraordinary opportunity to develop a situation in which Black people develop their own critical apparatus and come to use *their own* yardsticks rather than the white traditional yardsticks. This makes the white teacher's position all the trickier. Regardless of how hard he tries, he is still approaching his course from a white perspective and a white vantage point. If I am right about it, the Black community in this country and our young Black men and women are not ever going to escape from oppression until they develop their own yardsticks their own heroes, their own standards. And they are doing this just as rapidly as they can. Part of our job in the Black colleges is to facilitate this development, and not be afraid of it; rejoice in it, and to help it all we can. This certainly does make the job of the white teacher tricky. What he must learn to do is to turn the ordinary run of instruction around so that more and more of the presentation comes from the students. He must accept the simple truth that in dealing with the Black material, his students have more to teach him than he has to teach them. I believe there is much to be said for such an attitude on the part of college teacher generally, — and not just in the Black colleges.

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